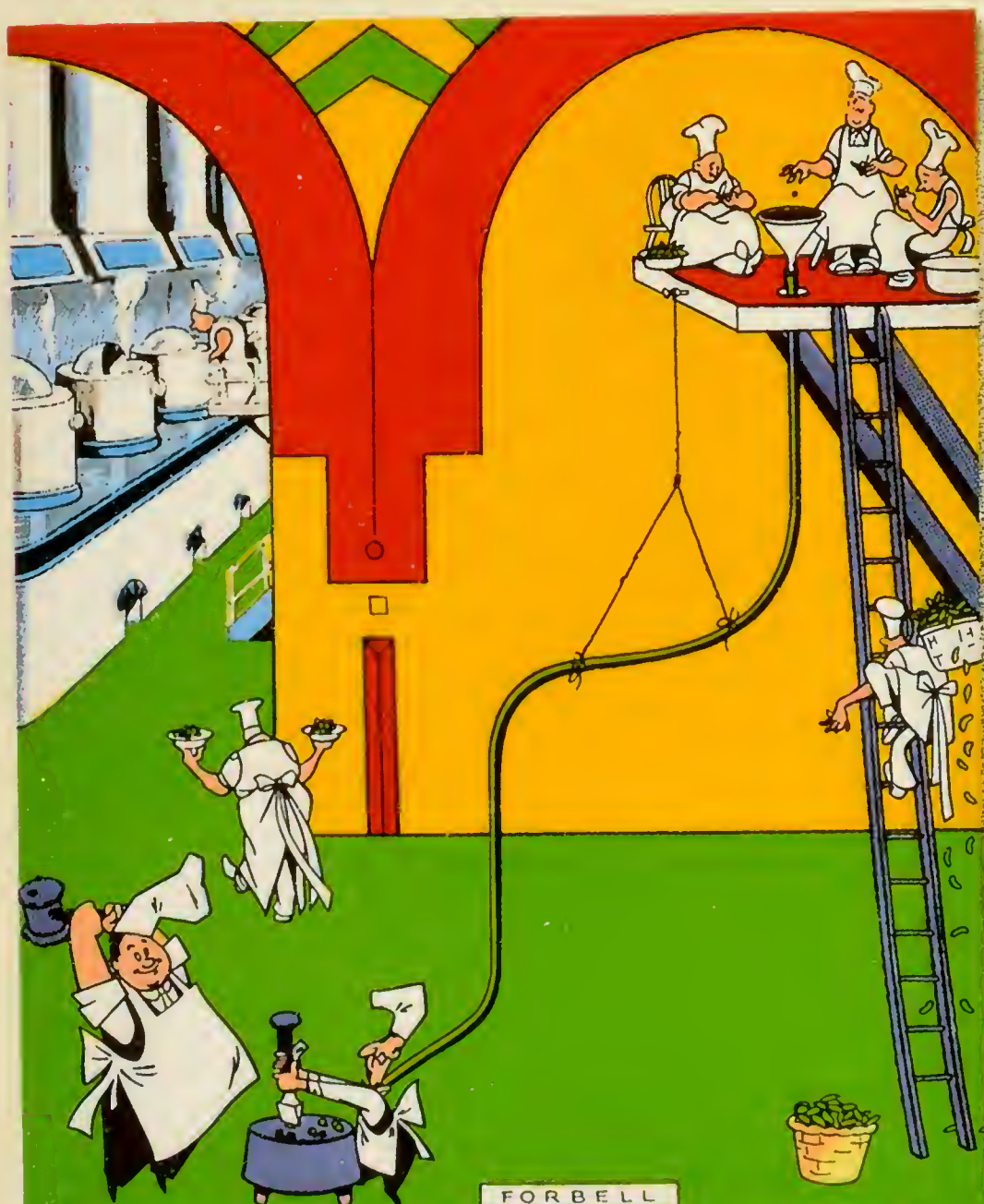


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FIELD

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SNOW

Cars do their deliberate absolutions
privately, in the street, grinding
gears, engine whine
and chant. Snow is
prayer rug, nothing more. And that smoke
curls and rises over wheel
and fender, the look of a moment
so openly lost.

But it might end up
in letters, the kind shrugged off,
scrawled on a postcard, one line
of pure attention. Then
it's business to be about, morning
leaking into the final
watercolor of sleep,
a blue wash, barely visible
on such fine snow.

Awake to a new planet! Is it possible
to live like this, glad
for the least treasure? The way
lit houses look, far off. Or one winter
the way the lake froze
solid as window, huts suddenly

everywhere and odd, ghosting
the ice. They weren't
prayer tents, but the men called
to the fish. I heard them: smoke
rising from their mouths.
I saw them: glittering lines descending
into the nether world. Such praise.

INVENTING THE TRAIN

On the high trestle where lovers
abandon their romance, rolling it into muffled sounds,
its ghost whistle whine
tossed off the bridge: *to hell with you, Jimmy O'Brien,*
you're just a jerk anyway — like that,
the voice of the heart
rising at last above its nonsense.
So I imagined
the old train — finally wooed and loosened and emptied
by such failure — stopping for us
abruptly, like a sunstruck horse.
It was dark. I got on first
and pulled you up.
It took a lot of convincing until I dreamt
food for us in the gleaming dining car, and waiters
too young to know what they were doing.
They were that cute. They still
liked their jobs. And the hamburgers arrived with splendor,
relish rich, tomato and pickle, a mute
flourish. By then you were
eating, and no longer doubting me.
I kept hard at the secret, inventing the club car,
the sleeping car for later,
all the landscape from here to Massachusetts
far into morning. Trees
were the hardest, their miraculous detail.
Faster, I whipped the old train, faster,
blurring them to a frantic pitch, a quick
belief. So easy in those lovely manic days
to fool you.

HOLY CARDS

A miracle, how the printing press
eked out haloes, and the pious freeze
in each picture — eyes locked inward on some
luminous dot in a head gone dark
as the TV dying to its own
bright pinpoint. We found the gold-rimmed cards
left behind in pews those Saturdays
after funerals as the last
old woman struggled into her Buick
and drove off.

You and I were maybe ten, so keen
on those keepsakes, low rent relics
of the one-most-recent dead. I turned one card
over to the *b. 1902* and the *d. just three days before*
and the *dear husband, father, beloved brother* — no one
we knew — and the little prayer.
It was Polish or Italian, another planet.
Creepy, you said. Come on. Sad tickertape, they were
mostly scattered in the back
and so many kinds: Jesus holding his pierced heart
straight out like a drugged surgeon; Mary
dizzy with visions or accidents
or both; or poor ordinary Joseph distracted
by sawdust in the shop, wielding an honest-to-god
awl as if nothing bad could happen.

By then, you were scouting near the altar,
no good unless
the men had knelt there, the kind who half-sat, leaning
back, a certain bored tilt to their
heads, and clearly — where? — still at the office, or sunk
in their slow backyards in those cheap webbed chairs.
They never took cards home. You'd genuflect before

slipping down each pew — such good girls we were — then
turn and flash
a fist, thumb high. A find.

Walking home, we'd count our kill, trade
as our brothers traded a Willie Mays for an Ernie Banks.
We'd do the sappy holy look: folding our hands,
hypnotized, standing just right
between leaves
so the light would fall straight
in that single famous shaft. Those silly, sweetened,
wounded cards. But we saved them anyway,
and looked at them and looked
and laid them out
like Solitaire in the quiet bedroom, those
blank ecstatic faces all
gazing back at once.

ARGUMENT, WITH MIGRATION

By Radioville, we were impossible, though the cranes,
they were radiant. They couldn't have cared less.
So many thousands the sky
blackened out: worse than inkblot, worse
than the school nurse, all business, pointing, now

what does this suggest to you? *Suggest.*
We'd got to the woods by then, and their voices
collapsed around us, hideous, like
plastic scraping plastic raw, amplified
by every heartsick turning leaf. Yet these were
real birds, big
strange ones, flamingo maybe, grayed out
by ancient circumstance, and awkward
as they landed, folding up like flimsy aluminum
chairs left out all fall
in the overgrown yard. Wind could
snap them in two, like that.

I was careful not to look at you, and held
the binoculars high until the world
narrowed and got bigger, the cranes
deliberate as monsters, lovable as any clumsy thing.
They never stopped talking.
But how private it was, their descent into the bleak
marsh, cornstalks bent back to a spirit
self, so far from summer. I turned

to look at you, binoculars
still in place. I fiddled with the lens: you
blurred, not blurred. You blurred again and again
as the birds dimmed into
twilight, quieting, dozing off,
whatever they do.

INTO DARK

A sun abandons care, bursts into evening.
Creatures hurry down from the trees. The house is
On fire but is not on fire; a tolerance spreads
Over the lost spoons, the stacks and daily lists.

The dogs lie, each with one eye open;
Over a table the silence of habit
Keeps to itself like a crow on a wire.
It becomes easy to feel this married. We sit on
Into dark as if no one could know. And, somehow,
The silhouette of chairs becomes agreement.

This isn't loss or tragedy. Neither is it
A sudden excuse for us to love ourselves.
Through a window the sound of a power-saw stopping;
We sit, quietly giving up outlines.
Across the valley other lights flick on,
Off. They too are tired of explaining.

FEBRUARY

Main Street granulates under a yellow blinking
Light. From a Vermont window
A body drops, determined; every midnight
Another hallowing noise. Kisses, kisses anywhere

When descent has started; a lamp keeps failing,
Fingers cold as crescent moons. Kisses
During those moments telling you that somewhere
Someone is trying to leave. Flags hang tangled.

In this weather no one can say yes. The one policeman
Dozes in his car, in the vanishing gauze of exhaust.
Pilgrims hurry home, head-bent. Voices blunder
Through their sleep. An embrace becomes involuntary,

Snow over a valley. A sleepy arm
Flinging itself over something possibly there.

SHE DRIVES

And drives like she is living
In a movie. A man on the radio sings
That being good is not good enough.

The tachometer glows. Phone poles
Necklace into the big sky; a hot dry wind
Flirts with her windows, with speed.

She remembers to keep her eye
On the distance. For a moment the dark
Empty space beside her fills

With retribution, for a moment the road
Seams up behind her. But then houses flash by,
Like scrawled notes pinned to the wall;

A shopping bag left on the front step,
A dog on the walk. Ornamental
Deer shimmer on the lawn,

Relentless, open-mouthed, grazing.
Bright kitchen windows, a hand
Offered across the table.

OCTOBER: LINES BEGUN NEAR THE SHORE
IN A HIGH WIND

The low roof pot swings
empty over the dark deck; two blue
flags snap-flutter on grommet rings
down the driftwood mast. "Who

are you dear?" my mother asks
last summer, eating her apple, her wig
awry under the sweeping gull's eye, basking
sweater-cozy in the sun. I am rigging

the extension ladder to stain the topmost
cedar shakes. "You mean I bore
you?" — and strikes the driftwood railing post
laughing, nibbling her apple core

to the seeds. She dozes in the August
heat. I dab and brush the dark
oil in as the breeze wavers in cooling gusts
off the water. In her sleep she mumbles "Hark,

hark." Later she says "You musn't mind me, dear,
but where have I been all these years?"
Now the island weather has changed again.
The blue flags drape, and the fog is rolling in.

PAINTING THE FRONT BOW WINDOW IN OCTOBER

The yellow locust tree butters
the grass of this closeup
view: necklace arms fluttering.

*My mother fixes the white lace
on my yellow blouse; my first day
in the second grade. I see her face.*

I brush each brown panel white.
The second coat does the trick. Beech
leaves drift against the white

mums. *Marjory Blood holds a buttercup
under my chin in Wormstead's field. Do you
like butter? Do you? Yup.*

Oyster mushrooms clump in the second maple
stump. *At the farm my mother
says my gosh you're handsome. Tell*

*me something, are you my younger
brother? There are twelve sills
to brush. I tell her*

*yes. Traces of brown stain bleed
in this gloss. The blue sky frames
that squirrel in the red oak, two acorn seeds*

bulge his cheeks. I rap the pane
and his eyes blaze. Hush,
hush: the brush moves over the sash and the grain

disappears for now. These versions
carry in the short run. *Last week
we lay on the mountain in the sun.*

*It's not you, you said, it's me.
The whole valley was neckcurls
and a river softening south. We*

*walked later beyond the Sunderland town
park. Close up again, the clear pane
brightens the honey locusts and that tiger's frown.*

*I see them as clear as that child in the front room:
the yellow leaves in their final flutter;
the tigers circling in their meltdown into butter.*

THE NIGHT WIND: SWAN'S ISLAND, OCTOBER

A big-eared mouse appears
and disappears behind the corner
boot, hearing

no football, no heavy-handed
log topping the birch-sogged
flames. Dead

soot crisps and drops into the fall's
first fireplace glow. All
summer I followed

her tracks with an owner's scorn
for untidy guests horning
in. Now shorn

of the easy confidence that comes
lying alone in the August sun,
Pastor John,

I am undone in my own house.
I hear the high tide roar as the mouse
carefully browses

in the tinkling pans. Without wit
I brought Joan the deadly news at lunch, the tidbit
that hurts,

and headed out on the ferry's leisurely run
to the oiled deck cold with beach stones,
pine cones

piled for the autumn fire. Wee
beastie, Burns called you, and me,
listen: the sea

roars exactly as the half-moon
rises over the yodel of the gone
summer loon.

AFTER TROUT FISHING IN THE RIO FRIO, SPAIN,
LATE JUNE

These peach roses bow
in the six o'clock sun, thin-
necked and collar-slack in
the garden row. How

ambrosial a pose
(rainbow trout, gill-red
in the finger grip, dead
weight) for the photo's

fast take before our lying
in the garden sun. Picture
the stream below the olive hill, its mixture
of bamboo and alder green in the drying

field rushing under
our feet, our poking poles
and the grasshopper twitch over the hole's
surprise. A snake, flour

white, slides away again
from the pink rose rising, slamming
the air, fish-tailing in the stream's
last breath, calming

in our heavy hands: white
petal scales, soft to touch in the sunlight.

NIJOLĖ MILIAUSKAITĖ: A SELECTION

these are lilacs
from Jaskonis's mill, which is near crumbling
each year
I pick a huge bouquet

empty neglected ordnance yards
each year
grass overgrows
the trenches, the bunkers, and the bones
in the common grave

these are lilacs
from Jaskonis's mill, the saddest
flowers, for you Jadvyga (the overcoat
hacked by moths rots in the attic)

and for you Karolina, you are old already, and for you
Barbora, the miners'
mother

and for me

*

You
who led the way into the forest's
cool shadows: your forehead
was marked by a tiny forget-me-not
that grew alongside the ditch when you
stooped down in the thicket and stared.

Autumn by the sea, the wind
flattens the worn-out dress
against your back, salty grass
cuts across your legs, your hair
is thick with sand. . . .

*

a cold evening, swollen painful
willow buds

migrating birds are
perched in the skeletons
of trees along the shore like great
black blossoms

a small reddish flame
there, far off, trembles in the icy wind
as if alive, near the water

a fire stoked by children

it's almost warmer, isn't it,
as we draw near

*

look, then: how big this
bag is on my back
here are gathered all
the sicknesses of the poor
the flu, mange, lice

tuberculosis, misfortune, despair
anger and revolution

this is what I've brought for you

as you dance singing before the glowing
Christmas tree
in the great echoing high-ceilinged
room

as the first star
rings in the dark sky
like a silver bell

*

on winter nights, when my grandmother
went to work
I carried a lantern
to light her way

large snow drifts on either side of the path
the Big Dipper, the north star, the moon
and the man who lives there
walking with a lantern, because he's cold and sad

he looks
at our lighted windows
at the burning candles, at the Christmas tree
at my eyes, filled with sleep

*

every spring
as the meadows blossom
along the river

my grandfather
smiling hands me
a flute he has just carved
from willow wood
he's been dead a long time my grandfather

and tiny yellow butterflies
cover his face

*

Children's Taste

There was a time when we ate
the swollen buds of linden trees
sticky and sweet

the sap of cherry trees, more delicious
than berries

gnawed small
green apples, secretly, with black bread

spat out the pits
of handfuls
of red brambleberries

sucked icicles

it was that sort of time

*

in the damp places
near the well
I search for horsetail — so my hair
will be light and shiny
as silk

I crumble oak bark
cut up the roots of sweet-flag
and burdock
gather cones of hops
birch leaves

spread out and dry chamomile
in the dark
rinse with stinging nettles

so my hair
will be long and soft
when you see me sitting by the window
combing it with a comb of bone

so my braids
will bind your feet

at night
I bathe in the quiet
forest lake
in moonlight

spread my linens on the grass
secretly
brew you something to drink

from grasses gathered on St. John's night
from roots
from the waters of the well of life
from magic

o grasses of sleep, bitterly sweet
grasses
of oblivion

translated by Jonas Zdanys

A TAXABLE MATTER

We are driving around another beltway of light. There are no houses no trees; there is no body of water. Things are as they seem. A hand glows under the radio's green dial. Both of us are taken up for a time with our own itinerant thoughts — something to do with borrowed binoculars, the mineral rights to an unknown relative's land or the dog's welfare — poetry's drop-cloths. Flares from refineries ignite our faces. For several hours we don't talk, then we do. Should we get off and look for a cafe where they serve charcoal and beer or should we go on; does the car need a ring job, and are the lives of poets worth living. We are at a point in space where the animate dark meets inanimate darkness. It's late, no one is waiting for us, the dog is in better hands than ours, we can say whatever we want. We can take the rest of the night.

In my book poetry is a necessity of life, what they used to call a taxable matter. I cannot objectively trace how I reached this exaggerated conclusion, but between us we can summon the grounds for our brand of tectonics in what would seem to many to be an age antithetical to the effort. Ultimately I don't believe any age is antithetical to the effort, I do believe years of reaction promote a thwarted artistic front. "Art is like ham," Diego Rivera said. I have often been reassured by this inexplicable claim. "Sometimes art (poetry) is like a beautiful sick dog that shits all over the house," Frank Stanford scribbled in a notebook. Not without sadness, I agree with this claim too. And if this hejira has become somewhat teleological, well, what is the long stretch of road for if not to sort out the reasons why we are here and why we do what we do from why we are not in the other lane, doing what others do. You have to understand, we come from a country that has made a fetish if not a virtue out of proving it can live without art: high, low, old, new, fat, lean and particularly the rarely visible, nocturnal art of poetry. What America cannot sell it can barely stomach. Herein lies a major reason for its creation — to contribute toward the devaluation of the dollar. At the very

least, the secular soul of the species is at stake. If this be smart-mouthing it is nonetheless truth-saying. We must do something with our time on this small aleatory sphere for motives other than money. Power is not an acceptable surrogate. Consider that the United States does not rank among the top five countries in literacy (Japan, Iceland, Sweden, East Germany and Finland), yet in advertising spends by more than five to one — 61,320 to 11,120 in millions — what Japan spends, the second biggest advertiser. We are talking about money spent, to be kind, on distortion. Poetry and advertising (the basest mode of which is propaganda) are in direct and total opposition. If one does not use language one is used by it. If you do not recognize the terms peacemaker missile and peremptory strike for oxymorons, your hole has already been dug. If you do not detect the blackest of ironies in the Army's made-up-on-Madison-Avenue, *Be All You Can Be*, never mind the perennials for no one will remember you.

Moreover, poetry is tribal not material. As such it lights the fire and keeps watch over the flame. Believe me, this is where you get warm again. And naked. And this is where you can remember the good times along with the worst; where you are not allowed to forget the worst, else you can not be healed. This is where your memory must be exacting, where you and your progeny are held accountable but also laudable. Even and especially in our day, in our land, poets are the griots of the tribe — the ones who see that the word does not break faith with the body. It is poetry that remarks on the barely perceptible disappearances from our world such as the sleeping porch or the root cellar (Grandmother Collins maintains the last root cellar in our family; who values their life would rather take a chance with the twister than descend the mossy steps, much less sample the roots hanging for generations by their screaming ganglia). And its barely perceptible appearances. In the booklength poem *Tjanting*, Ron Silliman jerks us into critical awareness by creating syntactical disturbances with cultural ephemera calling up everything in our "two-ply kingdom" from "baskets to hold wire garlic. . . . A little swcop cesnas by" to " 'Eraserhead saved my life,' said the woman

with blue hair." It is left to poets to point out the shining particulars in our blunted lives like the strands of blue lights Cotter, Ark., drapes every haunting Christmas from one empty storefront to the storefront across the street for eight unoccupied blocks. And it falls to poetry to keep the rain-pitted face of love from leaving us forever. I am even willing to argue passion is what separates us from other life forms — that is, beyond the power to reason is our ability to escape from the desert of pure reason by its own primary instrument, language. And if it be poetry that makes the word flesh, then it's no more escapable than our bodies. But it is at least that free.

And while veering in the illusory direction of freedom, I would submit, it is a function of poetry to locate those zones inside us that would be free and declare them so. Always there are restrictions: as traditional conventions of rhyme and meter are more or less disavowed with others remaining constant for long periods such as the enjambment, still another such as anaphora is revived after long periods of disuse. Nowadays we might see a formal limitation appropriated from another discipline for the course of one poem by one poet, i.e., the application of the fibonacci number system to paragraph lengths in Silliman's *Tjanting*. Poetry without form is a fiction. But that there is freedom in words is the larger fact, and in poetry, where the formal restrictions bear down heavily, it is important to remember the cage is never locked.

Pods of satellite dishes focus on an unstable sky. We begin to look for an exit. Maybe find a cafe where there are people. Or a bar. Some place where we can watch the fan work the smoke. We might even take a room. This is where imperfection gives way to perfection — where there are no houses and no trees and no body of water. Have I said, poetry is the language of intensity? And that because we are going to die an expression of intensity is a necessity? Allow me.

Franz Wright

PROVINCETOWN POSTCARDS

Wolf stars

Owl's head moth

Icon-yellow twilight

Sound of leaves & sea the silent sun

Will all have had ample experience when the last loneliness
comes

Harbor bells in the blizzard

PAWTUCKET POSTCARDS

Neon sign missing a letter

Firearm with an obliterated serial number

There's always death
But getting there —
you can't just say the word

Rhode Island Artificial Limb Co.

Lights of the abandoned
households reflected
in the little river through the leaves

The posthistoric clouds

THE DRUNK

I don't understand any more
than you do. I only know
he stays here
like some huge wounded animal —
open the door and he will gaze at you and
linger

Close the door
and he will break it down

OCCURRENCE

"I've gotten everyone who hurt me."

In a blackout a man loads his shotgun
again.

Outside the genuine star spangled twilight
of North Dakota
unfurls, twinkling and barking.

Then *he* becomes a ghost.

Big windblown rags of bitching crows
resettle
in the trees out back.

ILLEGIBILITY

Hawk in golden space

Thick-leaved, darkly
beckoning trees
bigger than the house

Sunlit apparitional
peaks of a thunderhead
fading
to the east

Page
from conception to death mask

The stranger who approaches on the
street and says, You
don't remember me

LONELINESS

Say you wake
in the night
abruptly alone
in the midst of addressing
vast stadiums . . .

Or at an intersection windows
shattered your forehead
leaning on the horn
a crowd materializing a light
snow beginning

Like the taste of alcohol to children

No

That with which there is nothing to compare

Say you have no friends, or
say you have to go to sleep

To see your friends

There

It's not so bad
the stitches itch
where they removed
your rage
is all

Where they removed
those thoughts

And no one
misses *them*

After several weeks
everyone learns
how to tie his own shoe

You get a little doll that looks like you

STILL LIFE: IN THE EPIDEMIC

Light
old leaf spine
fish spine bone
green under-the-
ocean light

big gold fish my
new little father
only a boy
breathing on the window
COME ON OUT

my eggful of eggs
floating opening
up in your cream, up in
your blood.
Are you sick? Are you well?

*A blood sample will be taken from your
arm with a needle and analyzed in a
laboratory using a test called ELISA
(enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay).
If the ELISA test is positive, a
second test, called Western Blot, will
be run on the same blood sample to
confirm the result.*

The palm of your hand is
salt on my mouth, is worse than life,
your rough tongue your talk is
warm on the cool hospital-issue
black silk blindfold crackhouse blindfold

you green in the dark tying a rubber
strap around my arm playing the radio

your heavy head, green in the dark,
Are you still in the room?
Are you still in the house?

Then you, Doctor, American doctor
in my dream, you say sincerely,
"You can always go on suicide neutral,
then everyone, from both sides, from his side and her side,
will leave you alone."

Then you say, "You are not enough.
I am. Eat me, &
I will raise you up. Eat me.
Chew me, gingerly, like chewing ice,
eat me. Like America. Eat me."

IKON

Swim in you, sleep
in you, let me,
Mother Lord,
all this hour

— I am your cloth of gold
wrapped up papoose
safe in danger
(you are in danger)

one hand curled around your
bending neck, the other
rested on your black breast,
just above your star.

Winter in the world
is winter here in you
but summer, too,

oh my play,
my eyes, my light. Madre!
There is no book
and my name is written in it, my heart makes
a black crib for your heart.

MELENCOLIA I

Albrecht Dürer, 1514:

Dazzled by the mere contemplation
of the pentagram,
the dodecahedron
that most “noble of solids,”
I am like a horseman without
a horse, practicing vertigo,
new feet balancing earth.

Compass, ruler cannot govern
the ecstasy of sight — a corner
abruptly turned onto the spectacle
of a *Metzgerei*, on the chopping block
a hare, skinned, still congealing,
sketched in fifteen minutes
before it can stiffen.

How is it possible the hand moves
before it thinks? And *feels*
muscle’s slick resistance
against bone, how then
drape on the white interface of skin,
replenish fur until all’s
intact again, plumped and dry. . . .

O this country is a brutal place
for a gentleman — raw
under the brushed furs
and the heart clenched so long
the merest warmth would incinerate.

How I shiver for the sun!

PAINTINGS

All the museums are afraid of me,
Because each time I spend a whole day
In front of a painting
The next day they announce
The painting's disappeared.

Every night I'm caught stealing
In another part of the world,
But I don't even care
About the bullets hissing toward my ear,
And the police dogs who are onto
The smell of my tracks,
Better than lovers who know
The perfume of their mistress.

I talk to the canvases that put my life in danger,
Hang them from clouds and trees,
Step back for some perspective.
You can easily engage the Italian masters in conversation.

What noise of colors!
And hence I'm caught
Very quickly with them,
Seen and heard from a distance
As if I had a parrot in my arms.

The hardest to steal is Rembrandt:
Stretch a hand out, there's darkness —
The terror seizes you, his men don't have bodies,
Just closed eyes in dark cellars.

Van Gogh's canvases are insane,
They whirl and roll their heads,
And you have to hold on tight

With both hands,
They're sucked by a force from the moon.

I don't know why, Breughel makes me want to cry.
He wasn't any older than me,
But they called him the old man
Because he knew it all when he died.

I try to learn from him too
But can't stop my tears
From flowing over the gold frames
When I run off with The Four Seasons under my armpits.

As I was saying, every night
I steal one painting
With enviable dexterity.
But the road's very long

So I'm caught in the end
And get home late at night
Tired and torn to shreds by dogs
Holding a cheap imitation in my hands.

HIDE AND SEEK

Let's believe everything we say,
It's such a wonderful game.
You're going to tell me: I love you
And I'm going to be childishly happy,
As if you'd given me a penknife
With a bone handle.

You're going to tell me plainly
Everything you think —
About the neighbors, the universe
And about rain;
Or you're going to tell me nothing
And all my thoughts will nod.

And I'm going to tell you:
On this nail there's a deep lake
And on each of the others a sea.
If you move your fingers through my days
You'll stir up Niagaras.

And tall grass will grow
From my words till evening,
Piercing the sky with its tips,
The earth at the very top
Or the seed of some star.

And you're going to believe in my grass.
And you're going to believe in it all, blindly.
And I'm going to believe in it all.
A step behind you.
Chivalrous.

LIGHTNING PASSED . . .

Lightning passed through me,
Lit me up fantastically
But killed
My son.

I put my hand on a doorknob
Someone painted scenes of
My whole life on,
Coming and going
Thousands of times,
And the door split in two
Like the tongue of a snake.

I turned into an oak leaf
And at the other end
You could hear
A sinister blast.

The hair of the flowers
I look at starts burning,
And you can see their smoky soul
Through their green clothes.

If I think of the forest
It'll turn into beets
Till tomorrow.
I'm so good
The light asks me to host it,
But nonetheless
There's an immense black circle
Around me.

HYENA

A lot of dead remained unburied,
But the others had to be dug out too.
I've got a terrible lust
To unearth the dead now.
The corpses of those sacrificed
After the bullets had their dinner
And felt too lazy to finish eating them —
The corpses of cowards
Shot in the back,
And the corpses of the brave
Shot in front.
The important offal of the old pharoahs
Who buried themselves with friends and horses,
And of the new pharoahs
Who bury themselves with a whole continent.
Come, hyenas, who've sacrificed yourselves
For the prestige of the world,
Remove the dust, remove the earth
From all the victims
Lined up between meridians
Like crossties on an iron road
Where all the trains have derailed
And let time stink, on and on,
For thousands and thousands of years.

*translated by Stuart Friebert and Adriana Varga,
with Gabriela Dragnea*

HEN

Jab
the rufflings.
Tear my tufts
out.
The claw
lifts,
clutches the mulch.
Get
the black spider.
Not the sky.

He wants the hen cut
(juice running down the blade
to his wrists, the black hairs
leading to the soft nests of armpits)
so I will have her
plump breast
on my plate.

Grasping
in oak chips.
Termites scuttle,
the soaked ground
too far below —

Our white fingers
bare across the polished table.
The crevices
between charcoals
could spill a carmine liquid.
He tilts the decanter.

until the
woman stamps
the dirt.
Hand in her pocket.
Look, and peck.

He wants to wring her neck
to take this feeding time from me
— the sweep of yellow seed from my fingers
and her head like a ridge of fire
diving down.

HAWK

Indoors
the embers burn
in black-red lines,
my menses
sliding down.

Small
feathers flatten
against my head —
I am flying into the
shearing current.
The liquid unravels
through the sky.
His gray face
tilts in the doorway,
hand shielding his eyes

and my cry dissolves
into the drops scattering
the rooftops.
The space curved below my
redblack breast
streams
with the rust rain.

A fire sputters in a backlot
below, charcoal crisscrossing
sand, greenish warehouses
rained on

— be beautiful
I cry to him,
please, so I can
still love you —

circling over

our house among the others

for hours

flooded

streets

iron-gray

rain

his face blurs
in the downpour.
The night wind.

SOUNDING THE PASSAGE

1.

Timbre
of the rib cage
drummed from in-
side
by her voice.

Moving
the air.
Intramuscular
thrumming. A thrush

humming
a story,
its imprint as from
heated

fingertips. Tender
as a mother's.
Hear
the rain.

2.

sound

the sensation produced by stimulation
of the organs of hearing
by vibrations transmitted through air
or other medium

audible vibrational disturbance

the result of utterance

to sound (a bell)

to examine by percussion (a chest)

to measure, fathom, ascertain

sound: free from damage, defect, disease

uninterrupted and untroubled,
asleep

3.

Something pulsed in her side,
its umber ridges
rippling. It was counting
as the movement passed through it.
Something uncurling.
A long low space
in her side, its roof slick and ridged
as the roof of her mouth,
pulsing
deeply when she breathed.

The capillaries of her left eye
crimped from looking.
The busy fluorescent rooms
filled with men bent over drawings —

in the low room
someone walked,
the umber walls
expanding and subsiding.

The movement passed through it.
It was marked and erased
by the passage of breath.
The tapping.
One, one, one,
no addition.

4.

the pocket in her left side talks to it-
self, gurgling.
Waves of air
unpleat the diaphragm,
the glottus undulates against the
walls of the throat.
Spaces in the face
resonate, easy arch of the brow,
heat
outspreads behind the eyes.
The visual passages
vibrate.
The highest notes
pervade the brain.

5.

her eyes close: flashes,
uncurlings, and pauses.
Black marks and umber curlicues
dart across the horizon and space
curls around the planet and outside it.
8 is the first figure she sees, then 9, again and again —

6.

in a place soft as pumice,
porous and dense
she bends her head,
moving through
the fleshy cavern

someone walking ahead

she winds through, forgetting
purpose, the twisted passages
tactile and tensed
the walls scratched

seeing what has been etched

7.

nightward
whose hand in hers
with her?

she who

pliant red passageway
moist and heated

a knifetip
unnecessary

throat glottal humming
unbearable language

a hand lies along her cheek

8.

inside a chambered structure
the walls streaked brown and sticky
standing still
tendons taut
skin twitching as if covered by bees

I walk deeper into the coolness
hear my breath against the stones
returning in a hush to me

on my left
a brick wall

inhale
the dust

the particles lit
flickering
do I see them because the eye vessel
ruptured, is it leaking blood
a haze across the eye

breathe breathe to keep seeing
in the blackness the air
lit with sparks then darkening

now see the sheen
and the room of recessed stones
the shattered jar
candle-wicks
row of archways
an altar charred

a large brick
loosened from the wall

its burnt markings
against my fingers
unreadable
the dust rises as I
pull it
my left side tearing
I drag it from the wall

9.

she saw the wrapped thing
in a hollow inside the wall
a density of flesh
netting decayed
clayey skin her fingers smoothing
the burnished green along the
cheek a bone sensed
the hollowed eyes
an infant hand cupping
its brow
a baby it was looking
inward to the thick wall
the other hand frozen
at its lips
paused in the musculature
of sucking

the tiny body
of gauze and flesh
reddish creased
genitals slashed
the site of a massacre
people fallen onto ground
what did it see

who could not cry out
whisper suckle touch
not morning or listening or
yellow light on coverlet

blood-caked
twisting
it couldn't turn its face away

eyeless baby mortared in

A GODIVA

Myself, I always thought it
a throwback revealing primate roots
I'd as soon forget. Oh but what

would I do without that stuff
softer than a hand, a spool
unwound on my head and gold
already, before

the weaver comes with that talent
I share; my one-word name
rivals the best of them: Rumpelstiltskin,
God.

My calling came and I went public as
a hedge on horseback in Coventry, the
sun fermenting the color of my hair
into grog that will not

lie wasted. *Eat, drink, be merry*
those aren't nude words. I put it all
on the table for surgery, not feast.
I want to be cut through to my

black woman's heart. She had one
in 1057 as well as a continent
that had not been reconciled nor
clothed. Breasts hanging as fruit

should, unpicked sculpture on a
tree, museum pieces. She is
something good for you that is not
medicine. And I

am her transmitted, no longer
literal, needful of reasons
to take off clothes that don't explain
living, and distort everything God

gave us, while trying to be
metaphors for the gifts. If I succeed
there is a tax that will die. I ride
like a morbid Midas, my lips

and fingers coax their love objects
into the most golden silence of them all.
The usual death rider got time off
for good behavior. I just worry

that I might like this, that I'll take
my heart out of the black woman and
put it in a dead thing.

PERSONA

The chameleon must have been blind.
Didn't take on the pale
of my hand
the way I once picked up a tick
from a woman in an office, my face
twitching for hours.
The hole in his eyelid
was closed — the one facing me —
but the other must have been open
because he caught an insect
before you could say the word
insect, and he wasn't even disguised.
Was here in this wrong place —
my hand — as I was here
in this city that wasn't mine.
I set him down on the red
part of my skirt
but he remained green,
just as my dark
glasses, the drab clothes, my mouth
shut like a closet,
the whole disguise that said
Stay away, I love no one
fooled no one.

TRYING OUT FOR THE CLASS PRODUCTION OF
“A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE”

My bones were fragile like Blanche’s, but when the talking came,
my body kept saying one thing, and the words another.
I took my shoes off, and went around being Stella.
Nobody wanted to be Blanche. There were fifteen
Stellas — each as earthy and strong as a Roman pillar —
and one Blanche, and when she went crazy

we put on our fake Greek masks, so we could go crazy too.
The light in the room was daylight.
We could have seen each as part of the other,
as a shadow is *part* of daylight — and out of that a third
person would come — I mean a person for real
life. Why didn’t any of us see that?

DRESS REHEARSAL

No one could find the puppets,
so it was only my hands
on stage, testing the lights,
feeling as naked
as some women do without makeup.

What must people at the trade fair
have thought? these two white hands
singing about fertilizer
to music by Arthur Sullivan?
Ignoring each other, like Richard and I.
Like poor Gilbert, and poor
Sullivan.

Here came the puppets at last:
the light bulbs
we had only to put the lights in.
Our arms touching, Richard's and mine,
as they sang. The prince voice, the fool
voice. The maiden voice, the witch
voice.

The head of my puppet hanging
but not in shame.
I was damned if I'd give my shame
to a puppet.

ACTING PROBLEMS: THE SUBTEXT

Tired, I am sick and tired
of this giving, one character says,
growling at the collector
as if he was a bone,
but giving him gold dollars
like dimes, while the other
says, Oh yes, I weep
for the unfortunates, I die —
and sends a look to heaven of pure
goodness, and gives
nothing.

 The subtext, Stanislavski
called it. It spilled into
the streets after us, followed us
back to our apartments . . .

 I try
being someone who waters the plant,
knowing only the greenness of it,
not all the unapparent life. I become
the plant, breathing softly.
Someone knocks, selling knives
he says are not dangerous.
Upstairs there is a thudding
that could mean anything.
The cat looks up
as a bird flaps at the window.
The smell of the bird is a fire
in the room as she waits:
her one yellow eye, blinking.

POETRY 1988: THREE REVIEW-ESSAYS

COMPANIONS HAVE COME

Sándor Weöres, *Eternal Moment: Selected Poems*, ed. Miklós Vajda (New Rivers Press, 1988)

Lars Gustafsson, *The Stillness of the World Before Bach: New Selected Poems*, ed. Christopher Middleton (New Directions, 1988)

Tomaž Šalamun, *Selected Poems*, ed. Charles Simic (Ecco, 1988)

"Companions have come" is a paraphrase from an early poem by Weöres, in which the Hungarian master pays tribute to his wife ("one never expected by my heart"), and by extension, to all those who enter our lives from afar and take both "life and death" from us. In so doing, they allow us to see by other light, he suggests. These three collections, coming to us from the House of Translation that has risen in our midst thanks to the efforts of so many editors and translators, remind us once again of how much more there is to literature than our own domain can ever suggest. While translation wasn't exactly invented yesterday, it is sobering to note that if it hadn't been for the likes of a Herder, say, who was perhaps among the first to think radically about a sense of world literature, and in turn affected contemporaries like the Schlegels, Tieck, Lessing and Goethe, Shakespeare might still be in the dungeon Voltaire would have consigned him to — one is still perplexed at Voltaire's notion of Shakespeare as a "dangerous barbarian"! The brothers Schlegel, whose splendid translations of Shakespeare's plays are still being studied, would be happy indeed at the results of the three books before us. It's heartening to report that all the translations here (with no exceptions worth fussing about) are of substance and grace; and in one instance, the Simic versions of Šalamun, it is hard to imagine anyone else "speaking" so well on behalf of the poet translated, so uncannily close does Simic come to the originals' spirit and intent in his solutions.

The Weöres book, carefully introduced and afterworded by William Jay Smith, Miklós Vajda, and Edwin Morgan, is a bold and adventurous look into the Hungarian's soul. There's little that Weöres hasn't picked up on, learned from, in his workshop over the past fifty years. He's been willing to scrounge through all the scraps left over from others' industry to find what he's needed to "make it new," like a sculptor who's not afraid to use and discard, use and discard, until at last the finished piece is welded into shape. It's also clear, as in the case of Milosz, that the full body of Weöres' poetry owes much to his sense of history and tradition. From his great learning, he moves easily from the remotest reference to the most understood event without losing a reader for the wrong reasons — he wants to be as clear as possible without becoming didactic or sloppy about formal issues. From great symphonic poems (written after the model of symphonies), to something like "Notes from a Diary," Weöres has as much to say to us as we can bear to hear. For now, let's take a quick tour through four pieces that I hope will indicate just how striking, how accessible, but also how various and transforming this poet can be. "The Colonnade of Teeth," coming as it did around the end of World War II, can of course be read against that terrible backdrop, and usefully so. The "God-Question" is still with us, asked by many both inside the awful suffering as well as from some safer distance. The more immediate frame, the journey through the hall of our own teeth, with an allusion by way of the word "colonnade" to the brain above, calls up the whole issue of responsibility and the role of language in perpetrating what happened:

THE COLONNADE OF TEETH

I

The Colonnade of Teeth, where you have entered,
red marble hall: your mouth,
white marble columns: your teeth,
and the scarlet carpet you step on: your tongue.

2

You can look out of any window of time
and catch sight of still another face of God.
Lean out of the time of sedge and warblers:
God caresses.
Lean out of the time of Moses and Elias:
God haggles.
Lean out of the time of the Cross:
God's face is all blood, like Veronica's napkin.
Lean out of your own time:
God is old, bent over a book.

3

Head downwards, like Peter on his cross,
man hangs in the blue sky with flaring hair
and the earth trundles over the soles of his feet.
The one who sees
has sleepless eyes he cannot take from man.

4

No sugar left for the child:
he stuffs himself with hen-droppings and finds what's sweet.
Every clod: lightless star!
Every worm: wingless cherub!

5

If you make hell, plunge to the bottom:
heaven's in sight there. Everything circles round.

6

Man lays down easy roads.
The wild beast stamps a forest track.
And look at the tree: depth and height raying from it to
every compass-point;
itself a road, to everywhere!

7

Once you emerge from the glitter of the last two columns
the cupola your hair skims is then infinity,
and a swirl of rose-leaves throws you down,
and all that lies below, your bridal bed: the whole world —
Here you can declare:
“My God, I don’t believe in you!”
And the storm of rose-leaves will smile:
“But I believe in you: are you satisfied?”

[1946]

(Edwin Morgan)

Other writers, like Holub, Herbert and Kozinski (I'm thinking of *The Painted Bird*), have also found exciting, alarming ways to mix the profound and the profane in their effort to comprehend our own age's horrors, but Weöres is very much his own question-and-answer man here, and, as the introduction by Vajda carefully notes, "totally unlike what had been expected of a Hungarian poet throughout the centuries." Nature *is* in on everything and often has the last ironic word(s). In "Signs," a poem from the same period, but one that refocuses on the man-to-woman relationship as the crux, Weöres is willing to insist on "the tooth-

ache," the necessity of identifying ourselves with some normal pain, before we begin to speak.

SIGNS

I

The whole world finds room under my eyelid.
God squeezes into my head and heart.
This is what makes me heavy.
This is what makes the donkey I sit on unhappy.

II

Heaven's crazy-man: light: you
pouring your face on the surface of the water,
what is that girl's face you proffer
stripping from your own madness?

Great saint, having swum through this world
you came to the empty silence, endlessness,
you climbed with the void to a crystal wedding-dress:
be frank, what woman is it like?

III

Man, waken the secret woman in you:
woman, light up your masculine state:
for if the Invisible embraces you,
it will enter you and take you into it.

IV

Oh how large then is love
if it goes with us in our whirlpools?

And what large love lies waiting in us
if it can be taken into our whirlpools?

V

More than your heart's cloudy afflictions,
more than your mind's labour of doubt —
value your toothache more than that,
for it shines out.

Your questions have only words as their answer,
but each thing answers itself.

[1947-48]

(Edwin Morgan)

As ever, poets must take on the question of love — it may be central to every act we perform; and it is a condition that has gotten us into and out of most everything, whether on global (Weöres would even imply cosmic) scales or measured in more intimate places. As Eliot pointed out (in another context, to be sure), we “need an admixture of *weakness* with either heroic virtue or satanic villany,” to make matters plausible. Weöres, in his middle period and especially in these post-war poems, will not embrace weakness or folly, will not excuse us therefore, but also will not deny that there may be whirlpools where it is necessary to save the minimum.

As if to look for another way out of human dilemma, and as if to anticipate the next generation's way with less, he also can build sparse poetic constructions that say much to us while they leave much out. In “Moon and Farmstead,” strangely related to some of Robert Francis's dense but eerily light wordscapes, Weöres jumps over some of the hurdles he'd put in his own way in the earlier, more congested pieces:

MOON AND FARMSTEAD

full moon slip swim
wind fog foam chord hum
the house empty

rampant
thorn fence
eye blaze

moon swim flame
grass chord twang
cloud fling

the house empty
door window
fly up

chimney run
fog swirl
full moon circle

the house empty

[1954]

(Edwin Morgan)

Having just reread Steinbeck's *The Moon Is Down*, I'd inadvertently provided myself with a possible context for this haunting, unsettling watercolor of a landscape. Reading the spaces between the words, my mind drifts to another setting, Bergman's film *Shame*. Both these works comment on World War II, as does the poem I believe, in *peripheral* but (hence more?) powerful ways. In his doctoral dissertation, *The Birth of the Poem* (we learn from the foreword), Weöres proclaimed, "I want to send out a ray of light that will shake the entire being, instinct, feelings, comprehension, imagination and spirit. The reader reads the poem but the poem

also reads the reader. I want to radiate through the reader and shake him so that he will give up his closed, final, existential singular 'I' for the benefit of the open, social, cosmic, and endless plural 'I's.' What better way to do it but by "negative" suggestion — "the house empty" is just the right refrain to indicate that what is missing is what was once there, barely. While quite a few poets have experimented with this sort of open form, where the emphasis is on substantives and other parts of speech are stamped in as if nouns, it seems to me that Weöres, like Francis, took this form in an important direction: the voice of the poet turning voiceless, talking to nobody save perhaps the objects invoked themselves.

"Renaissance," a relatively recent poem that indicates the directions Weöres has been taking in the Eighties, amply illustrates his ongoing commitment to merging — if possible in every poem! — elements of folklore, dream, philosophical abstraction, and imaginative conceit. What sets him apart from others one "hears" while reading this poem — Csoori, Szyborska, and especially Krolow among his European neighbors, and Simic, Strand and Merwin among American poets, is his insistence on working past a sort of wistfulness, past sensations that are not constant, toward forces one must accommodate oneself to in the present moment, while maintaining a distancing strategy that would seem to apply to another time only:

RENAISSANCE

It was the era of masks
and the bird saluting the well.

Eyes opening to knowledge
cobbled the dark alleys.

Solid ruins stepped from the past
and mixed with present dilapidation.

Wombshaped, pluckable instruments
contended with huge baggy keyboards.

Born in pain
sincerity
was promptly dying.

Anyone who thought to speak
was already overheard.

The city was full of expectation;
the country with countless flowers,
and unsuspected silky tunes
flew, like a mist of cuckoos, far off.

[1980]

(Hugh Maxton)

If that takes a little time to put together and understand, so did its subject! (As I finish this, news comes of Wöoves' death a few months ago.)

Lars Gustafsson, born in 1936, is largely known as a fiction writer, but he has also published a considerable number of poems and the *New Directions* volume will go a long way toward establishing his reputation among English-language readers. The claim that the (excellent!) editor Christopher Middleton makes is not hyped: Gustafsson "has remained distinctively a poet, insofar as his novels and essays usually combine exploratory and fabulous features with keen observation, a fascination with character in conflict as the subjective (or existential) axis of history, and a delight in story for its own complex or simple sake." The deeper background for his identity as a writer in general and a poet in particular may well be found in his philosophical studies, especially focused in his critical work on philosophies of language, "Language and Lie," which appeared in 1978. It is obvious from considering all his artistic work that while he brings immense learning to bear on it, he stays out of the way of the pieces themselves. A little like his major Swedish contemporaries in some

ways (i.e. Tranströmer, Martinson and Ekelöf), he has nevertheless managed to carve out some ground for himself. What I especially admire in these poems is the severe beauty, a severity that in part has to do with things that, "originally meant for something else," now contain other things. The more we reuse things in this way the more we stand a chance to obliterate all history:

ELEGY

The small tin boxes holding screws. The small
boxes with their trademarks half rubbed off,

originally meant for something else,
now contain screws. Nothing but screws.

Late-autumn day, the strong wind brings crows,
a dozen, whirling and flapping at the roadside.

Plato, grown old like a teacher of small boys,
in a grubby sweater, regards them without passion,

knowing that their archaic idiom is
Ionian dialect. Impenetrable.

In rainy weather the Forms do not exist.

Once I too had a form to see with
and so could understand the world I saw.

One of these small tin boxes carries an emblem,
a gold medal: *First Prize, Amsterdam*.

Now it contains screws. Nothing but screws.

What other birds do I know?
The wren. Field-lurker, songless.

The wren at dusk between the hills and the houses.
Resting a moment at the side of the ditch.

Perfectly still in flying.

(Philip Martin)

What I particularly like here is the double-focus of the elegy, on one's own more promising past, now waning perhaps, as well as the impenetrability of another creature's life and ways, its own condition, which is not trivialized or anthropomorphically argued away. Looking past his own accomplishments, but also past his own lack of knowledge, the poet is able to put off the attention to the wren till the last, when his mind is able and willing to think about the apparently unrelated thing more compulsively, more fully, even while it issues from a mourning for the lost self. He, or someone else, has won *First Prize*; he could have been trapped there. The knowledge the prize represents is transitory, especially when it comes down to what else we can know, or think about. Fortunately, he knows — we can know — about the wren (just one more bird, one step as it were beyond the crow, which can be understood as beginning knowledge) — (read perhaps Buber's "other"). And that wren, were it to move, might do the impossible and even mystify Plato, by implication, by flying "perfectly still." The form(s) one learns to see the world with can only come to paradox, especially when we may be visited, *let* ourselves be visited, by a vision.

In "Notes on the 1860s," like Weöres, Gustafsson can look at our own time (and even somewhat into the future) more lucidly through the lens of the past. More poets might take a note from this note, and look to past events for vibrant sources:

NOTES ON THE 1860s

George Boole's book on the laws of thought appeared in 1844; that's three years before Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

In Boole's book the seed of the computer is to be found,
the ticking relays, the vacuum tubes of the future.

With charming innocence this algebra teaches us
that every set has something in common with the "empty set."

The empty set. In a dream I meet Baudelaire,
small, transparent, dark shadows under his eyes,

and I insist that he comment on Boole.
He accepts this request as being altogether natural

and starts with a quotation from the Marquis de Sade:

"Nothing floods us with fear and lust so much
as knowledge of the ticking relays, the vacuum tubes,
murmurs that come from the hotter mineshafts of the future."

All of a sudden he checks himself, as if he'd said too much.

"Sir, we walk on ice polished by the wind. You understand?

We live in a time when the wind is rising."

(Christopher Middleton)

What might, in another's hands, be reduced merely to quotation, or paraphrase, or found-poemism, gets elevated here, I believe, to poetic commentary and the discovery that our best knowledge may come from dialogue that ripples into triologue as de Sade is invoked. This quasi-dramatic piece allows for a thematic complexity no single, however definitive, voice could manage. Of course Gustaffson is behind all the voices, but not as ventriloquist. He offers them as a sort of recommendation, and given what he and we know of Baudelaire, we want Mr. B. to talk like

that. The usual accidental variables of a poem evaporate. The moment of recognizing that too much might have been said is the consequence of the same forces that bring about the poem.

More wind turns up in this next poem. And more landscape as the fitting setting for unsettling knowledge about ourselves:

WARM ROOMS AND COLD

We go from warm rooms to cold
and from cold to warm again.

Someone being born cries suddenly at the light.
He knew all along the landslide was coming.

How many mysterious cities underground
are built by what we call the heart!

Intercourse is a way of remembering rather than forgetting.

Sometimes we're dry snow crystals
driven by ice cold winds, whirling

over a large shiny ice surface. Without mercy.

Large warm summer days under immense trees
royal deer graze in the green shade.

A mild wind goes through the landscape.

I mean, our complaining must also come to an end.

(Yvonne Sandstroem)

(Oh yes, I want to cry, please let my complaining come to an end, now!) Rilke is softly invoked, here, I believe ("You must change your life," from "Archaic Torso of Apollo"), but we are ready for

plainer, more linear instructions nowadays. And the voice of this compelling piece is, as in most Gustafsson texts, literally unliterary; these are coldly framed one and two-liners. Our visual imagination need not overcompensate here. Gustafsson is altogether a poet who can help us live better.

My temptation in talking about Šalamun is simply to quote the poems and refer you to Simic's and Hass's way with the edition. Hass's introduction is quite wonderful; surely, since his first essays appeared a while ago, Robert Hass has become what we have much needed, a poet with a penchant for talking easily and incisively about the large contours of poetry — where it comes from, who makes it, what it is good for — and Simic's editing takes us, in informative sequence, through unusual and unusually evocative poems by a poet quite unknown in English, though he has published more than twenty volumes of poems in Slovenian. Though we learn that Šalamun has grown up in the post-war years, his range and depth and eagle-eye view of what had come before are enough to rank him with the strongest voices from his part of the world, no matter their own striking accomplishments (I'm thinking of Popa, Holub, Herbert, even Milosz . . .). Although perhaps more likely to be influenced than some (Hass alludes to Šalamun's even having made use of American poetics), Šalamun has also managed to stake out his own ground and in his attention to "quest," rather than "rebellion," as Hass notes, Šalamun also turns what has become so negative for so many into a positive force. I am not talking about cheaply seeing the positive in everything, but about hard-won, often theologically soundly argued positive responses, and that can be quite uplifting in a troubled time, an emotion for which neither Šalamun nor this reader needs to apologize. Let me present three poems, one after the other, before I attempt a few concluding remarks:

[UNTITLED]

Dürer's hare
hisses and falls
from a great height

onto
the linen which will not
sustain it. It

will break
through and explode.
The tent pegs driven in the

earth will
bend. Threads will hang
down toward the green

grass. There is no
wind to muffle the double
shotgun blast

of the hare. The blast of
linen and immediately after it
the blast of its skin

on the earth
or was all that
just to make the threads sway.

(Charles Simic)

* * * * *

[UNTITLED]

Peace to the people of this earth

God remembers all the travelers
remembers rain in Arras
and David's son
remembers a squirrel falling on the earth
I yell rabbits

thinking they were really rabbits because I'm shortsighted
God remembers Stavrogin
remembers churn of rotten wood and our games
the way I clean my teeth
and say peace to the people of this earth
out of all the Empire-style furniture
I like the Napoleonic legs
God remembers
God remembers how painstakingly I worked
to make a tetrahedron out of a slice of bread
and kept throwing it furiously against the wall
and there was the war
and parents saved sugar
The fire is getting closer
night or whiskers
I see hell where my angel used to stand

(Anselm Hollo and the poet)

* * * * *

THE TREE OF LIFE

I was born in a wheat field snapping my fingers.
A white chalk ran across the green blackboard.
Dew made me lie on the ground.
I played with pearls.

I leaned fields against my ear, and meadows.
The stars were crackling.
Under a bridge I carved an inscription: I don't know how to read.
They rinsed the factories with salt water.

Cherries were my soldiers.
I was throwing gloves into thornbushes.
We ate fish with the golden bread knife.
In a chandelier above the table not all the candles were burning.

Mother played the piano.
I climbed on my father's shoulders.
I stepped on white mushrooms, watching the clouds of dust,
Touching branches from the room's window.

(Sonja Kravanja-Gross)

In his thoughtful introduction, Hass puts his finger on the larger pulse here. Reflecting on the differences between an older generation of central European writers, and younger writers, like Šalamun, coming into their own now, Hass rightly sees that the younger "tend particularly to resent the politicization of all aspects of life. The novels of Milan Kundera also speak to this theme," he notes in passing, "as do the essays of the Hungarian novelist, George Konrad. His *Antipolitics* calls for an effort to push back the frontiers of the political in order to give breathing room to personal, and merely social, life." Hass then adds a timely afterthought: "That some Western European and American artists have, at the same time, made it a project of postmodernism to demonstrate that in consumer societies the personal is a complete illusion fabricated by late-twentieth-century capitalism, and that poets need to create a language that will filter this illusory 'I' from the clear water of linguistic play, is one of the peculiar twists in cold-war aesthetics." Interestingly, two major poets of the older generation (actually three, though in Milosz' case the situation is much more complex), Krolow and Holub, have been attempting to expand on personal elements and agendas in recent work. Krolow, whom I spoke with this past fall, seemed eager that one understand that even Celan represented himself quite personally in those poems we have been taking as the most hermetic, the most inscrutable — if only we could have heard Celan booming out "songs" in late-night gatherings in Parisian locales! Krolow recalled — and went on to suggest that that was part of Celan's last struggle to come to terms with his own life and work. A missing 'I,' Krolow offered, was never indicative of absence of personal involvement, after all, or absence of human presence . . .

Of course Šalamun, in these three plaintive pieces, has his own witty way with what his 'I' arbitrarily creates from possible past events ("I yell rabbits / thinking they were really rabbits because I'm shortsighted"), but he is not about to forget that puff-ball mushrooms, when you step on them according to a mushroom-gathering friend, "release fascinating little clouds": "I climbed on my father's shoulders. / I stepped on white mushrooms, watching the clouds of dust." This detail is made the more intense by staying with itself, rather than reaching for a connection with nuclear weapons, say, that if they are there at all are way in the background. And so Šalamun is reassuring about a world that is nearly enough like mine so that I miss little when I read his as mine.

In closing, I'd like to refer readers to Eliot's essay, "Goethe as the Sage," in which he explores many issues having to do with translation that still hold in general and that illuminate what I have been trying to appreciate in the three poets considered here: in discussing the interrelationship of wisdom and inspiration, Eliot contends that if one has both qualities in some abundance in the same poets, then it is they "who belong, not merely to their own people but to the world."

Stuart Friebert

STANDING IN THE WHOLE STARE

Jean Valentine, *Home Deep Blue: New and Selected Poems* (Alicejames-books, 1988)

W. S. Merwin, *Selected Poems* (Atheneum, 1988)

Because these books are not "Complete Poems," assembled after the poets' deaths by their publishers, but sequences of poems chosen by their authors in full vigor, they read as wholes, rather than as separate small piles. Selection has let these poets concentrate on their major continuing concerns, pressing these into ever-tightening springs.

For both Valentine and Merwin the chief concern is the threat of an empty universe. That is a terrifying thought for persons living in a culture which assumes that human beings have purpose and value, and that their worth will be measured. The concern that unifies both these *Selected Poems* is, "What really am I, and where?" Though their mode is lyrical, their search is metaphysical.

Beginning with *Dream Barker* (1965), Jean Valentine reaches for human comfort, a human recognition of human need and worth. But "The hand in the dark was my own" (p. 28); he "stood up slowly . . . and walked away" (p. 31); "the thing itself [was] not the thing itself/But a metaphor" (p. 34); and then I woke up . . . /Bone dry, old, in a dry land" (p. 35); "I have come to where the world drops off/into an emptiness that cannot bear" (p. 29). Next, in *Pilgrims* (1969) and *Ordinary Things* (1974), this intensified need for human contact becomes a numbness: "Breaking. I just sit" (p. 45); "blood memory: fixed on vacancy": (p. 58); "all your old desire; but in a strange tranquillity" (p. 57). She has lost feeling itself: "God break me out/of this stiff life I've made" (p. 56).

In *The Messenger* (1979) the poet begins to accept living again. The man from the Warsaw Ghetto provokes her shame: " 'I've lived the whole time/here in peace. A private life.' 'In shame,/'

I said" (p. 67). Then, day "keeps beginning again: the same/
stubborn pulse against the throat,/the same/listening for a
human voice —" (p. 69). Having come to see the expected uni-
verse as a huge indifference, "the earth's bright rim/ . . .
floating through an indifferent blank, without/color without
consolation —" (p. 68), she has to accept disintegration of self or
conceive a different universe.

In the crucial poem, "The Messenger," part dream part
epiphany, she is visited by all her family: "We aren't afraid,"
"Now I want to live forever," "You say you came to tell me, if I
live without you/I'll live. That's always been your story." "*If you do
not teach me I shall not learn.*" The messenger answers:

— First, you see, you must be still. Touch nothing.
Here, in this room. To look at nothing, to listen to nothing.
A long time. First, you see, you must open your clenched
hands.
You must carry your mother and your father at your breasts.

The dream continues:

I stand on all fours, my fur
is warm; warm organs, the male and the female.
The earth is light and warm around us.
We lick our cracked old worries
like blood away from our faces, our haunches, we
nudge each other, all our white fur, goodbye, goodbye . . .

*saying again there is a last
even of last times*

I wake up with one hand holding hard to the other hand.
My head rests on oilcloth. A quiet voice laughs, and says again,

— You were going to go without me?
That was always your story.

The dream vision has reunited her with human beings she thought she had lost, convinced her that "there is a last/even of last times." The apparently empty self has become part of a living whole, a Christian universe.

There is still loneliness present in the twenty new poems which begin *Home Deep Blue*, but not the paralysing loneliness that began to clench in *Dream Barker* and was finally released in *The Messenger*. Self and other, no self and no other, have become one, not in the manner of lord and vassal, but in the manner of a woman filling a pitcher. This filling is not a deliberate act; the pitcher cannot fill itself. God's compassion cannot be earned; it can only be accepted. God is playing a Biblical woman's role, filling, fetching, and serving. And when Jean Valentine asks, "Who am I?" and listens, she is fulfilled:

TRUST ME

Who did I write last night? leaning
over this yellow pad, here, inside,
making blue chicken tracks: two
sets of blue footprints, tracking out
on a yellow ground,
child's colors.

Who am I?
who want so much to move
like a fish through water,
through life . . .

Fish *like* to be
underwater.

Fish move through fish! Who
are you?

And Trust Me said, There's another way to go,
we'll go by the river which is frozen under the snow;

my shining, your shining life draws close, draws closer,
God fills us as a woman fills a pitcher.

Merwin's *Selected Poems* begins with myths, fairytales, parables and other tales from his first four books, *A Mask for Janus* (1952), *The Dancing Bears* (1954), *Green with Beasts* (1956), and *The Drunk in the Furnace* (1960). They reincarnate Judeo-Christian values, sometimes from the mouths of Biblical characters ("St. Sebastian," "Lemuel's Blessing"), sometimes from the lives of people he has known (grandmother, grandfather) or observed ("The Drunk in the Furnace"). There is humor in these, and affection. Though there is no particular craving for human closeness, there is no deep alienation either. Then, near the end of *The Moving Target* (1963), comes a short, matter-of-fact declaration of intent:

FINALLY

My dread, my ignorance, my
Self, it is time. Your imminence
Prowls the palms of my hands like sweat.
Do not now, if I rise to welcome you,
Make off like roads into the deep night.
The dogs are dead at last, the locks toothless,
The habits out of reach.
I will not be false to you tonight.

Come, no longer unthinkable. Let us share
Understanding like a family name. Bring
Integrity as a gift, something
Which I had lost, which you found on the way.
I will lay it beside us, the old knife,
While we reach our conclusions.

Come. As a man who hears a sound at the gate
Opens the window and puts out the light

The better to see out into the dark,
Look, I put it out.

The next four books, *The Lice* (1967), *The Carrier of Ladders* (1970), *Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment* (1973), and *The Compass Flower* (1977), accept the challenge of "Finally," and we watch the self stripping itself of all usual habits and customary dependencies to stand in the whole stare of an indifferent universe:

EXERCISE

First forget what time it is
for an hour
do it regularly every day

then forget what day of the week it is
do this regularly for a week
then forget what country you are in
and practise doing it in company
for a week
then do them together
for a week
with as few breaks as possible

follow these by forgetting how to add
or to subtract
it makes no difference
you can change them around
after a week
both will help you later
to forget how to count

forget how to count
starting with your own age
starting with how to count backward

starting with even numbers
starting with Roman numerals
starting with fractions of Roman numerals
starting with the old calendar
going on to the old alphabet
going on to the alphabet
until everything is continuous again

go on to forgetting elements
starting with water
proceeding to earth
rising in fire

forget fire

He reduces loneliness to a dog's hunger "climbing a mountain higher than time" (p. 213). Though he is still "bowing not knowing to what" (p. 133), and though he can still sit in a roofless hut, "with a dead shepherd/And watch his lambs" (p. 129), he has dispensed with a need for religion: "The gods are what has failed to become of us" (p. 123).

Merwin seems to have no particular fear or anguish or self-pity in restructuring his universe of stone and empty space. The self seems to him more of an inconvenience than a companion, and he rather enjoys the thought of spending his life climbing out of it (p. 232).

In the last group of poems, from *Opening the Hand* (1983), Merwin's confrontation with the universe seems to be complete. A note of satire has crept in about relatively trivial things, such as Berryman advising a young writer, remarks suggested by a statue of General Sheridan, moronic questions asked of tourists at a pineapple plantation, a de-definition of *modern*. But *Selected Poems* ends with "The Black Jewel," about the voice of the cricket, which threads all lives and deaths together on a single *is*. We are the "luck of the cricket," no more, no less. And that, Merwin seems to say, is enough:

THE BLACK JEWEL

In the dark
there is only the sound of the cricket

south wind in the leaves
is the cricket
so is the surf on the shore
and the barking across the valley

the cricket never sleeps
the whole cricket is the pupil of one eye
it can run it can leap it can fly
in its back the moon
crosses the night

there is only one cricket
when I listen

the cricket lives in the unlit ground
in the roots
out of the wind
it has only the one sound

before I could talk
I heard the cricket
under the house
then I remembered summer

mice too and the blind lightning
are born hearing the cricket
dying they hear it
bodies of light turn listening to the cricket
the cricket is neither alive nor dead
the death of the cricket
is still the cricket

in the bare room the luck of the cricket
echoes

There is an isolation in Merwin's poems quite different from Valentine's. They do not show him in close relationship to people (he has not included the love poems), and he seldom seems to regret it. When, in "Yesterday," a friend's father says he would like to talk to his son for a while, if his son is not too busy, the friend says, "I told my father it was so/and I got up and left him then/you know//though there was nowhere I had to go/and nothing I had to do" (p. 258). Somehow the selections from *Opening the Hand* suggest that there is nowhere Merwin has to go at present and nothing he has to do. His resolve to stand calmly in the whole stare of an indifferent universe has succeeded in reducing the old habits and the old urgencies.

On the basis of these two collections both Valentine and Merwin are major poets. Their purpose is cosmic; it grows out of a universal discomfort/despair. Neither has dodged it or trivialized it or been finally crushed by it. Merwin's conclusion that the fact of life is enough to live on is perhaps the sturdier of the two, but Valentine's loss of self in a larger self is daring too — and even more moving. Single volumes of selected poems in the hands of poets like these are not sums of parts, but cumulative long poems — told by full pitchers and the voices of cosmic crickets.

Alberta Turner

MAKING HISTORY

Linda Bierds, *The Stillness, the Dancing* (Holt, 1988)

In *The Stillness, the Dancing*, Linda Bierds' persistent subject is the effort to imagine herself so fully into historical events that the past becomes the present, the public merges with the private. To this end she has clearly learned from the work of such writers as Norman Dubie. But while Bierds, like Dubie, sometimes explores and creates the world of specific historical figures — Commander Scott in quest of the South Pole, say, or Stradivarius thinking of his lost son as he hovers over the pieces of violins on his worktable — more often her concern is an "ordinary" historical moment or situation — a woman in an arctic storm in 1600, or a child in a Conestoga wagon heading west. In this distinction lies her particular achievement: her best work reflects a double vision, set in history and yet released from it by imagination. Her research seems impeccable, but fortunately she is not confined by it; the facts keep giving way to intuition, intensely empathetic and hauntingly articulated.

A typical example is the ending of a poem called "Pearl," which vividly presents the experience of an emergency in a quartz mine:

Now and then some tremble may continue, up
through the ankles, thighs. There is the wheeze
of a bank collapsing, and into the drift tunnel

creep the poisons of powder fumes, methane.
It is then, with the motion of bathers, that
the miners dip into their airmasks, bite
down, and turn together, all
the headlamps reversing their light

to its first horizon.
And nothing can stop what follows,
not science, not the elements:

in a grave interaction of chemicals, saliva,
the airmask biteplates begin heating.
Past the mulch and black-slush, into the skip,
up through the timbers, they grow hotter,
hotter, scorching the tongue,
the palate, until the miners, trapped by a halo
of methane, by the slow pull
of the skip-cable, feel their hearts withdraw, feel
their nerves collect in this new center, foreign
and not — all the flames pushing off,
regathering — the great heat, great pressure —
foreign and not.
But for their eyes, these workers are the color of
quartz rubble, stacked
and lifted . . . lifting . . . past the shale beds,
limestone, from the rain into the rain . . .
and here is that moon, swelling to meet them —
old ghost, old platter of steam —
and here is the world of the world.

How delicately and surely Bierds uses her learning here, so that the emphasis is not on how much information she imparts, but on how fully she creates sensation: the strangely distanced sense of motion, the heat of the biteplate in the mouth, the panicky numbness of catastrophe. The fine balance between empathy and precision here is characteristic of Bierds as her best, as is the mythic resonance she suggests in this account of the voyage out of the underworld. The final image echoes a detail from earlier in the poem, where we are told that in the mine “it is always raining. Always / the temperature of sliced ham cooled on a platter, / a placemat, these things of another world.” The miners’ nostalgic return to the moon “swelling to meet them” is nicely qualified by the wryness of “old ghost, old platter of steam,” and the final line — “and here is the world of the world” — signals the degree to which the poet is in control of both her rhetoric and her mysteries.

Perhaps even more original are the poems in which Bierds

uses history as a springboard for a set of odd and startling juxtapositions. The title poem, for instance, begins with the description of the ancient double skeleton of a woman and her stillborn child, as seen by passengers on a train:

. . . something white, then again, something
white at the side of the eye. They straighten,
place their lips to the glass, and there, far
below, this delicate, bleached pattern,
like the spokes of a bamboo cage.

What, someone whispers, and What, What,
word after word bouncing back from its blossom
of vapor, the woman and child appearing,
disappearing, as the train slips down through the alders. . . .

In the second part of the poem the train moves on to confront another mysterious scene, which we only gradually come to recognize as that of the film crew of Fellini's *Amarcord*:

And so there are stories. Mortar. A little stratum
under the toenails. A train descends from a mountain,
levels out, circles a field where a team of actors
mimics a picnic. The billowing children.
On the table, fruit, a great calabash of chilled fish.
And over it all, a beloved uncle, long mad,
sits in the crotch of an oak tree.

He hears to his right, the compressed blare
of a whistle — each sound wave approaching shorter, shorter,
like words on a window, then just as the engine passes,
the long playing out.
He smiles as the blare seeps over
the actors, the pasture, the village

where now, in the haze of a sudden snowfall,
a film crew, dressed for a picnic, coaxes a peacock

to the chilled street. Six men on their knees
chirruping, laughing, snow lifting in puffs
from the spotlights. And the peacock,
shanks and yellow spurs high-stepping, high-stepping,
slowly unfolds its breathless fan, displays
to a clamor of boxcars, clubcars —

where riders, excited,
traveling for miles with an eyeful of bones
see now their reversal.

In an ecstasy of color the peacock dips,
revolves to the slow train:
each rider pressed to a window,
each round face courted in turn.

Part of the pleasure of this is the sheer shock of recognition, our delight in the way Bierds has appropriated the film's great peacock scene. I also admire the way she plays life against art, allowing us to be both inside and outside the film, inside the mind of the mad uncle and simultaneously conscious of the artifice of his construction, the world of actors and spotlights. Finally, of course, the poem is powerful because of the way it works as a whole, the link between the two scenes firm but not overinsistent ("like words on a window," "an eyeful of bones"), the journey from death to the ecstasy of art achieved through a fresh and continually surprising diptych.

As these examples suggest, Bierds' vision of experience is highly dramatic. Many of her subjects suggest life lived at its extremities: shipwreck, house fire, the perils of exploration, a seventeenth-century dissection as painted by Rembrandt, Pasteur's experimental treatment for rabies. And yet the urgency of these situations often leads surprisingly to a kind of calm, pure vision:

The sailors stop, close their eyes for an instant,

and this emptiness might be a paddock,
horses just beyond, nudging the fence beams,
the beautiful cycles of replenishment
about to begin. Deep in this half-lit
and perfect silence, they stop, close their eyes,
and here is the land of their birth after all,
its water simple and everywhere.

("Within the Horse Latitudes")

Or, as a family watches its house burn, we get not hysteria, but a beautiful, restrained precision that is at the same time extremely moving:

Their kitchen is burning, soon
the bedrooms and small parlor. In a flurry
of the intricate, corn kernels burst
from their casings, milk
and the ruby molecules of vinegar burst.

Burning. All the details of their lives,
all the *pieces*: napkins and window frames, tiny
spiderings of plaster under picture hooks.
And the molding: white rods
of pine, hand-clipped,
hand-stained one night on a nest of newsprint,
stroke after soft stroke, each
beautiful pore darkening.

("Winter Fire: Minneapolis")

The gradually narrowing focus, lingering finally on the plaster cracks and moldings, seems to me psychologically exactly right, while the intellectual play of the final "darkening" keeps the ending from sentimentality. Some of Bierds' poems are quite dense and extremely difficult — after repeated readings, I'm still

not sure I understand the several levels of "A Collector's Letter on the Last" or "Abelard the Drowned" — but her risky, polyphonic language is almost always compelling and richly evocative. And at its best, as in poems like "Doll's House: Federation Forest, 1860," her work takes the details of history — or painting, or botany, or medicine — and constructs from them a mood of transcendent, hypnotic poise.

Since this quality is impossible to capture in paraphrase or even extended excerpts, I'll end by quoting one poem entire. "The Claude Glass: 1890" is less complex than some of the other poems, but it demonstrates the uncanny way in which Bierds both particularizes and universalizes her subjects:

It is 8:06 in the morning,
a Sunday in August.
Just at this moment, no one is weeping in all of Paris.
The world swirls on its axis, science
blooms, cream is dipped from saucers
with knuckles of ginger-cake.

At the foot of a canopied bed
a man kneels, crosses his wife's cotton stocking
over her garter. He laughs
as the fabric stretches and slides,
the round disk in its metal clip like a sugar tablet.

They have dressed for the country! The basket
is heavy with Brie and oranges,
a Claude glass in a gilt frame.
Such a rage, the man thinks, as they
walk from the wheezing train:
this black mirror in its leafy halo,
its reductions to shadow and light.

And then for an hour he sits, swaying
with the swaying clubcar.

The headrest is lush and sunken,
its sparse velvet pelt surrounding his neck
like the stomach of a spaniel.
There is pipe smoke, the snap
and whisper of cards. Drifting, the man
thinks of a saxhorn from his childhood, then
of lamb chops, his father's face
near death, the hazel, scummed eyes.
Now and then, a river gleams out through the trees.
Soon, when it calms to a green bay,

they will stop — his wife, friends,
the others of their station, brilliant
in cottons and bunting.
All afternoon they will trouble the shoreline,
sometimes wading, sometimes posing in twos, threes
in the flat eye of a Claude glass carried from Paris.

A rage! the man thinks: each family
for an instant historical, each
blowsy collection of heights, a masterpiece —
all around Paris, clumped together
in parks, countryside,
the mirrors tilted this way and that, until
motion and color drop away, until faces
peek out like polished bones, and around them
a Claude Lorrain landscape of hedgerows, black oak trees,
sucks up to a centrum of light.

The man stirs, shakes his head. Near his shoulder
his wife's breathing is deep, rhythmic.
Over her face he watches the window's reflections —
the beeches and steep escarpments,
the foxtails and grasses — flash, flash,
so fast they might be a pulse,
sharp heartbeat of something he cannot name.

Bierds is careful to take her time here, lingering over details like the garter and the wonderful comparison of the headrest to a spaniel's stomach until she has fully established the authenticity of her scene. Then, when the more metaphorical implications begin to emerge, they feel unforced and persuasive. As the man imagines the magical perspective of the Claude glass reducing and shaping the particulars of life into a precise image, making "each family / for an instant historical, each / blowsy collection of heights, a masterpiece," the poem has become self-reflecting, has indeed become a mirror of Bierds' central enterprise. Life begins to assume the familiar contours of an Impressionist painting, and the link between art and death is deftly suggested ("motion and color drop away, until faces / peek out like polished bones"). But then, in a masterful stroke, the poem shifts back to the present activity of the train journey, and the stasis of the fixed image is replaced by the rhythm and energy of the moving landscape, which seems, in its relentless and unnamable immediacy, the very heartbeat of life itself. It's a memorable performance, and beautifully represents Linda Bierds' achievement in this collection.

David Walker

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JUDITH BERKE's collection **White Morning** will appear next fall from Wesleyan.

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